

Telecom: Nice-to-have, or basic necessity?

Ken Banks, IDG News

It's been a busy week for organisations like [Telecoms Sans Frontiers](#) (TSF). With two natural disasters in quick succession – Cyclone Nargis in Burma and the Sichuan earthquake in China – they've once again sprung into life, deploying teams to these hard-hit areas with communications equipment at-the-ready. When natural disasters strike, communications networks, often so vital to subsequent relief efforts, are highly vulnerable. True, in Burma there wasn't much mobile infrastructure for Cyclone Nargis to destroy, but in China – a country with well over half-a-billion mobile phone users – there's plenty and at the earthquake's epicentre it literally collapsed under the strain (although, ironically, some of the landline infrastructure remained in tact). Without the ability to communicate, essential field-based co-ordination is problematic, if not impossible. A hastily deployed communications network can save time, money and – more importantly – lives.

Events such as those in Burma and China drive home the importance of telecommunications in our connected world, but relief operations are not alone in feeling lost without it. Today, growing numbers of people in the developing world rely on telecommunications – usually in the shape of a mobile phone – for a wide range of daily activities. You just have to look around and ask. Few people want to remember life before their mobile, and for increasing numbers of children and young adults, they have never known life without one.

With increasing evidence that mobile technology helps improve economic opportunity – not to mention more efficient access to health services, education, financial services and a general feeling of wellbeing and 'connectedness' – households in the developing world are going to increasing lengths to own and run one. Recent studies in Uganda show rural households using their limited budgets to purchase airtime instead of food. For some people this raises awkward and challenging questions, while for others it simply shows the importance that the poor place on their ability to communicate and transact.

At the height of the recent Kenyan post-election violence, a column in the [New York Times](#) reported that "fuel, food and cell phone credit" were in short supply. Who would have thought, even just a couple of short years ago, that in a time of crisis cell phone credit would be uttered in the same sentence as 'essential' fuel and food items? In Uganda there may be no immediate humanitarian crisis, beyond the challenges people face on a daily basis and a President determined to cling to power, but here airtime is seen by many as an essential commodity, and seemingly one as more important than fuel wood and food in a growing number of cases.

Four recognised basic necessities of life – not to be confused with human rights – are food, water, shelter and fire. Of these, food can be grown, water collected, shelter built and fire made. In years gone by, this gave people a certain degree of control over their destiny. After all, these basic necessities have been universal throughout all of human history – it's always been possible to grow

or gather food, to collect water, build or find shelter, or start a fire. By the sounds of it – in some parts of rural Uganda and Kenya at least – people are putting communications above food and fire (and perhaps also above water and shelter). It begs the question – in today’s day-and-age, should communication be considered the *fifth* basic necessity of life?

If so, we have a dilemma. The mobile industry is, after all, for-profit (so you can’t just go on a hand-out spree). If it were not, it’s unlikely we would see the level and rate of innovation and investment that we do today. Handset manufacturers, network operators and content providers alike all have at their disposal incredibly powerful and liberating technologies, and ones which do change and save lives. Finding a balance between innovation, turning a profit and getting these technologies into the hands of those who need them the most is a challenge, and a fine balancing act.

To its credit, the mobile industry is rising to it. Handset manufacturers continue to push the price barrier, with new handsets now available around the \$20 mark. Network operators continue to extend coverage, sometimes into areas with little chance of immediate financial return. Content providers are pushing out services which give people weather information, market prices, health advice and information on job opportunities. Many are even tackling issues of literacy and power, both of which are recognised barriers to mobile ownership. Progress is staggering, so much so that we sometimes forget how young this industry really is.

Of course, things are not all rosy. If people are choosing to purchase airtime over food, then there are implications. Cost of access and ownership are clearly still barriers for many, and if some people have phones and some don’t – and these positions become entrenched – then we’re creating whole new local and national mini-digital divides to rival their international counterpart.

There is still work to be done. Maybe we’ll know we’re there when people are able to afford airtime and put food on the table.

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